

## Chapter 5

### THE REBELLION IN DARRAI-NUR

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#### THE REBELLION: QUESTIONS AND PARADOXES

On 27 April 1978, Afghan Communist revolutionaries led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin overthrew the government of Muhammad Daoud, thus ending the rule of the Muhammadzai, the Pashun royal lineage that had dominated Afghan politics for one hundred and fifty years. The officials of the new Communist government were almost exclusively members of the educated elite and had neither sympathy for nor understanding of the tribal and peasant rural population that comprised the majority of Afghanistan's people. Lacking legitimacy in the eyes of most Afghans and handicapped by narrow, doctrinaire views, officials of the Communist regime quickly succeeded in alienating large sections of the population. Beginning at first with isolated uprisings, armed rebellion finally spread throughout the country. By early winter 1979 it was apparent that the Afghan military was incapable of containing the rebellion despite massive Soviet aid. Thus in December of that year units from the Soviet army and air force crossed the Afghan border and occupied strategic roads, cities, and bases in the country. Feroocious and bloody fighting between Afghan guerrillas and the Soviet invaders ensued—fighting which continues to the present. In this struggle an often ragtag, poorly armed assortment of peasants, tribesmen, and urban dwellers divided by ideological and ethnic differences has so far proven a match for the Soviet Union. This not only continues to surprise Western military "experts," but poses perplexing questions relating to the nature of popular rebellions as well. In this chapter we shall attempt to provide some understanding of the rebellion in



Afghanistan through an analysis of events in one small rural area, the Darra-i Nur Valley of Nangarhar province.

Darra-i Nur, a side valley within the Kunar River valley system, is located about twenty-five miles from the city of Jalalabad. It begins in the Kund mountains and extends for about fifteen miles before opening into the main Kunar Valley near the town of Shewa. Darra-i Nur itself is a valley system in miniature: small tributary valleys branch off at various locations along its length. At the village of Panj Ulla, roughly eight miles from its mouth, the main valley forks. One arm extends to the northwest toward Laghman, while the other extends to the northeast and broadens to form a large bowl, a formation not uncommon to mountain valleys in Central Asia.

About 10,000 people inhabit Darra-i Nur, scattered in settlements ranging from compact villages to dispersed homesteads. They speak various dialects of what linguists call *Pashai*, a language belonging to the Dardic branch of Indo-Aryan. Some of these dialects have distinct local names, and some are mutually unintelligible. However, no one in the valley uses "*Pashai*" in reference to his/her language, and it is never used as an ethnic appellation.\*

Fighting between the inhabitants of Darra-i Nur and troops of the Communist government broke out in the winter of 1979. The first organized opposition began in Kashmund Qala, a highland village located in a tributary of the main valley. Mir Beg, an influential leader from that village, led the initial fighting, which began when the men of Kashmund Qala surprised a contingent of the Afghan army stationed at Panj Ulla. After early rebel success, the resistance of the government troops stiffened; the battle lasted five days. During the first part of the fighting the rebels captured modern weapons, making it impossible for the government forces to hold out against them. As a result, the government troops evacuated Panj Ulla and Led a few miles south to a primary school, leaving a large store of modern weapons and ammunition behind.

Due at least partially to widespread political discontent in the valley, Mir Beg had succeeded in gaining the cooperation of the politically important groups and factions in Darra-i Nur, as well as the Pasho-speaking Safis of the lower Kunar—a particularly noteworthy achievement given the intense rivalries and deep-seated animosities

that had previously divided the various groups in the area. In these rivalries tribes, village clusters, and factions were the meaningful entities; Darra-i Nur itself was never perceived as a significant corporate political unit. By building a political alliance that spanned tribal and factional differences and creating a military organization that crosscut earlier political divisions, Mir Beg successfully altered the political structure in a fundamental manner.

Led by Mir Beg and armed with newly captured weapons, forces from this new alliance attacked and destroyed the government troops barricaded in the primary school; the entire valley was now in rebel hands. Unfortunately for the rebels, however, in spring 1980 a new government force armed with tanks and augmented by Soviet advisors attacked the valley from the government-held base at Shewa. The lower Darra-i Nur is wide and traversed by a relatively good road, so the tanks could operate effectively in that part of the valley. The tanks provided the government troops with an advantage that the rebel forces could not overcome, and they were forced to retreat to the more rugged terrain in the surrounding mountains. The government troops were unable to advance beyond the end of the road, effectively reducing the fighting to isolated encounters. This respite gave the rebels an opportunity to reorganize their forces and refine their techniques for destroying tanks with homemade mines, gasoline-soaked blankets, and fire bombs. When they finally counterattacked, the rebels defeated the government troops, who evacuated the valley and retreated to their base at Shewa. As of 1980 the Soviet-supported government troops had not been able to retake Darra-i Nur.

The events related above suggest a number of questions: (1) Why did the people of Darra-i Nur take up arms against a vastly superior military force armed with sophisticated modern weapons? (2) Why did the valley's inhabitants forge an alliance not only with one another, but with the Kunar valley Safis as well? and (3) Why was a highland leader able to organize the alliance and change politics in the valley in such fundamental ways? These are perplexing questions for a number of reasons. First, animosity has existed between the people of Darra-i Nur and the Pashun-dominated central government in Kabul since the valley was first incorporated into the modern Afghan state in the late nineteenth century. Yet incidents of rebellion had been few, and they had usually occurred when the government's military strength in the valley was crippled due to political upheavals and

\*For a detailed analysis of *Pashai* ethnicity, see Ovesen (1982).

weak leadership in Kabul. Given this history, one would not have expected the people of Darra-i Nur to rebel against the Taraki/Amin regime. For one thing, it would not have been surprising if they had viewed this regime as they viewed the previous Muhammadzai governments—as a slightly different, but similar manifestation of Pashtun domination. (Amin, the most powerful leader in the new regime, was an ethnic Pashtun infamous for his Pashtun chauvinism.) For another, the military strength of the Communist regime at first appeared substantial. The Afghan military was supplied by the Soviet Union with modern small arms, tanks, fighter bombers, and helicopter gunships. The army was advised by military personnel from Eastern Europe well trained in techniques of modern warfare. Moreover, the government apparatus was organized, and political leadership was entrenched. In short, in certain respects the situation following the Communist coup was similar to situations during the Muhammadzai period when Darra-i Nur had remained relatively peaceful.

Second, on the occasions when open opposition to the central government had occurred, competing political groups and factions in the valley had usually taken advantage of the central government's military weakness to resume warfare among themselves rather than to attack government troops in the area. During these times cooperation among rival political groups in the valley was rare, and alliances were unusual between the peoples of Darra-i Nur and the Kunar Valley Safis, who for centuries had been considered hated enemies.

Third, prior to the rebellion the leaders in Darra-i Nur who were most influential outside their own local area were generally large landowners, or *khanis*, whose holdings were in the agriculturally rich lower valley. An obvious example was Malak Baba, whose wealth and fame were known throughout the region. Malak Baba had numerous political connections outside the valley and was so well known that he was jailed for a time by the Communist government immediately following the April revolution.\* One would expect that if anyone were to successfully create a viable alliance in Darra-i Nur, it would be a lowland khan such as Malak Baba, whose widespread respect and influence could be used to forge political allegiances. Yet the leader

\*It is interesting that Malak Baba shared a jail cell with Muhammad Anwar, who became the rebel commander of an upper Kunar Valley alliance. (For details, see the chapter by Richard Strand above.)

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who emerged, Mir Beg, was from a highland village and had not previously been particularly influential outside the valley.

To gain an understanding of the rebellion in Darra-i Nur and at least partially answer the questions posed above, it will be necessary to isolate and analyze a number of interconnected elements. Thus I shall attempt to explain the nature of local government in Afghanistan, discuss changes that occurred in the relationship between the inhabitants of the valley and the central government both during the time of Daoud and following the April revolution, look at political ideology as expressed in symbols to see how such symbols motivate people to political action, and analyze the environmental and social structural features necessary for understanding traditional political leadership in the valley.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE APRIL (SAUR) REVOLUTION

In 1968, while I was involved in field research in Darra-i Nur, the valley was a subdivision of the Shewa district. It was under the joint administrative control of a subdistrict commissioner, or *alagadar*, and a police commandant. In addition, the Afghan court system was represented by a full-time clerk. The valley itself was too small to have a *qazi*, or Muslim judge, in residence, but it was visited from time to time by a *qazi* stationed at the district headquarters in Shewa. There was a local jail at Panj Ulla, the government headquarters in the valley. The *alagadar* was assisted by a clerk, scribe, jailkeeper, tax collector, and various personal servants, all of whom were responsible for many of the day-to-day administrative tasks. The police commandant had a small detachment of paramilitary police to enforce government policy.

Although these officials received nominal salaries from the government, these were insufficient to meet even basic needs. Most of their income came from bribes extracted from the valley's inhabitants. Since the *alagadar* and commandant were not closely supervised by their superiors and since bribery was built into the system, it might appear that government free from corruption was impossible. However, bribery was not officially recognized and was not given overt legitimacy. If an *alagadar* or police commandant were too blatant in



his demands, concerted action by local political leaders could be organized against him and charges of corruption made to his superiors. Such charges were effective because much of the male population in Darra-i Nur was armed, and the control of the government was thought to be tenuous by government officials themselves. Although armed uprisings were few, the government perceived the possibility of such opposition as very real. Therefore if an alaqadar or commander made himself so despised that an uprising were threatened, he was quickly replaced. Because officials knew that abusive demands could lead to their replacement, most kept their demands at a level acceptable to the local people.

Since local officials were dependent on bribes for a large part of their livelihood, they were to a degree dependent on the good graces of the local population. As a result, a balance was struck between government representatives and the people of Darra-i Nur. In many respects villages were left to run their own affairs, but taxes were collected, men were conscripted, and the legitimate right of the government to handle certain kinds of civil and criminal cases was recognized. Successful alaqadars had at least some respect for local customs and considerable understanding of the structure and organization of local politics.\*

The recognition of the government's legitimate right to rule is especially important. As political anthropologists have known for some time, no political system can function effectively without an acceptance of its legitimacy by its members. In Darra-i Nur (and Afghanistan as a whole) the judicial arm of the government was intertwined with Muslim ideology; thus in the context of civil and criminal justice the government symbolized Islam. This was an important—if not the most important—factor in local acknowledgment of the central government's legitimacy. As we shall see, it is particularly relevant for understanding the Darra-i Nur rebellion.

Changes in the local political system began to occur prior to the Saur Revolution. When Daoud first came to power, he included members of leftist parties in his government. Later he reversed this policy and attempted to purge Communists from the government.

\*Acceptable balances between government officials and local residents seem to have been fairly common in Afghanistan; for example, see Ubetoi (1968) for a discussion of how bribery operated in the Andarab district of northern Afghanistan.

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Many were sent to the provinces as government officials and schoolteachers. Most of these were members of the urban elite who had little experience interacting with rural people. They were harshly doctrinaire, despised local customs, and had no understanding of local politics (Strand 1980). It is not surprising that they rapidly aroused the distrust and dislike of the rural population.

After the revolution, changes accelerated. The new officials charged with rural administration were at first flushed with revolutionary zeal, and (at least on the surface) adamantly opposed to the old system of bribery, claiming that it was a manifestation of the decadence of the previous Muhammadzai regimes.\* To the inhabitants of Darra-i Nur this meant that government officials would no longer be dependent on bribes and thus would have no reason to respect local customs or accommodate indigenous political leaders. The local population felt threatened with the loss of a particularly effective means of controlling government policy in its area. The fabric of the previous political system in which indigenous political structures were integrated with the state bureaucracy threatened to unravel.

Two policies introduced by Communist officials were particularly intolerable and ultimately motivated the people of Darra-i Nur to rebel. The first was the introduction of Communist ideology and the debunking of Muslim beliefs in the primary schools. When young schoolchildren informed their parents of what the new school officials were teaching, violent feelings against the local Communist government boiled to the surface. The new curriculum undermined the foundation of the central government's legitimacy, which stemmed (as we have seen) from the integration of judicial processes with Muslim beliefs and practices.

The second policy was to increase military conscription. As fighting spread throughout the country, government casualties grew, and it was necessary to draft replacements for the army. The reaction of the people of Darra-i Nur to the demand for conscripts was predictable: they found it intolerable. As an informant stated, "We could not let our sons fight for the *kafirs* [infidels] against Islam." It was at this time that Mir Beg organized the men of Kashmund Qala and the rebellion began.

\*Although bribery was attacked verbally by Communist officials, in many areas of Afghanistan it remained an integral part of the administrative system.

## POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND SYMBOLISM

As noted, the military success of the people of Darra-i Nur lay in the cooperation of groups previously antagonistic toward one another. Islam played a crucial role in this cooperation. By attacking Islam, the government had not only significantly weakened its own legitimacy, but it had also threatened core values. Islam provides a sense of self; as Abner Cohen argues, selfhood, or the "I," the oneness of an integrated psyche, is necessary for all people. It is attained both in the course of social interaction and in continual participation in symbolic activities provided by social groups. The political aims of social groups cannot be accomplished unless there is political unity. Unity is achieved "not by contractual mechanisms that operate on the individual from the outside through reward and punishment, but by moral and ritual obligations, by 'oughts,' operating from the inside and involving the total self" (Cohen 1979: 101). In Darra-i Nur it was possible for Mir Beg to motivate individuals to put aside ancient antagonisms and present a united political front to the Communist enemy because cooperative behavior *sui generis* came to symbolize the Islamic moral and ideological orders which have always been the sources of the sense of self for the inhabitants of the valley.

The symbolic linking of Islam with unified political opposition to the government probably would not have occurred if either the Communist government had retained the Muslim judicial system which symbolically identified previous regimes with Islam, or government teachers and officials in Darra-i Nur had at least publicly supported basic Islamic tenets. However, because the government both secularized the system of justice and publicly attacked Islamic beliefs, it became identified with kafirism.

The notion of kafirism was very powerful in Darra-i Nur (as in many parts of Afghanistan) and aroused strong emotions among the valley's inhabitants. In essence it stood for moral bankruptcy and inherent evil. The belief that the Communist regime was a kafir government required that the inhabitants, as devout Muslims, oppose it. Since opposition could best be accomplished through political unity, putting aside ancient tribal antagonisms became an Islamic moral imperative, and this imperative was skillfully utilized by Mir Beg.

In order to ascertain why a highland leader was successful not only in forging a political alliance, but assuming command of it as

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well, we must first understand the differing ecological and social structural patterns of the lower and upper areas of the valley. In the process we shall understand why the particular skills of highland leaders were especially suitable for the task of uniting the disparate groups in the valley under the conditions which followed the Saur Revolution and why those of lowland leaders were not.

## ECOLOGY, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

During the Muhammadzai period cultivatable land was both relatively rich and extensive in the lower parts of Darra-i Nur. The valley bottom was wide, and although some terracing was necessary, the entire bottom land could be cultivated. In this part of the valley the elevation was low and the climate mild. Rainfall was not particularly high, but in most years melt from extensive snow fields in the surrounding high mountains provided ample water for irrigation. This combination of factors permitted intensive cultivation of rice with high crop yields. Of added importance to the lower valley's economic system was a motorable road that transversed Darra-i Nur for about eight miles from its mouth. This road connected the lower valley to Shewa and Jalabad, thus permitting crop surpluses to be transported to markets in these towns. As a result, rice farming was highly lucrative for those who controlled sizable landholdings, and it is not surprising that it was the most important economic activity in that part of the valley.

The form of local-level politics in the lower valley was closely related to the nature of the economic system. Political competition generally took place between khans (each of whom was supported by his tenant clients). Land was of key political importance, since (through the cultivation of rice as a cash crop) it provided wealth that could be used to subvert an enemy's followers, solidify alliances, bribe government officials, and allow one to live in a style necessary for acceptance among the Pashtun-dominated Afghan elite. Land was also important in determining the number of supporters a khan could mobilize in confrontations with his enemies because the number of tenants obligated to support him was in direct proportion to the size of his holdings. Because land was of such importance, most political confrontations concerned it in one way or another; political fortunes

rose or fell in relation to success or failure in land disputes, and where land was at issue, each khan was the potential rival of all others. Some khans allied with one another when threatened by a common enemy, but the political factions formed by such alliances tended to be of short duration. In general khans were suspicious of one another and perceived themselves as relatively isolated in a sea of potential enemies.

Settlement and kinship patterns in the lower valley reflected political organization. Settlements were often scattered and comprised of easily defended fortresses, or *galas*, located in the midst of each khan's holdings. These fortresses were inhabited by khans, their families, and various servants, guards, and lackeys. A khan, his unmarried children, married sons, daughters-in-law, and paternal grandchildren usually lived in the same gala, while his adult married brothers usually inhabited separate galas. Tenants inhabited scattered small houses or tiny hamlets located close to their landlord's fortress. In the lower valley corporate patrilineages were not an important aspect of political organization, and tribal membership was not politically relevant.

In the upper section of the valley and in the small tributary valleys that reach into higher elevations, there were significant differences in ecological patterns. For one thing, the terrain was considerably more rugged and therefore more difficult to cultivate. The valley floor was often too narrow and rocky to cultivate at all; as a result, most fields were located on mountainsides where the slope was relatively gentle. These areas were not always contiguous, but often scattered throughout the mountains. The size of fields was also affected by the rugged terrain. In general, fields were significantly smaller and narrower than in the lower valley. The transportation system was different as well. Because of the highland terrain, the construction of motorable roads connecting settlements in the highlands to outside market centers was too difficult and expensive. As a result, highland villages were interconnected in many places by paths not negotiable by burden animals. Differences in the irrigation system also related to the terrain. In the highlands a particularly intricate system of irrigation channels fed water to terraced fields, many of which were high above the bottom of the valley. In certain places wooden viaducts were built to carry water along steep mountainsides and across narrow chasms. Finally, the climate in the highlands was too cold for rice cultivation; the staples were winter wheat and maize. Both the

lack of cultivatable land and the cold climate limited yields of the staple crops.

These differences had several important consequences. Because crop yields were small in the highlands, agriculture was primarily for subsistence. Moreover, agriculture alone could not provide an adequate base; thus goat herding was as significant an economic endeavor as the cultivation of wheat and maize.

Differences in social and political organization related to these ecological differences. Because cultivatable land was so scarce in the highlands, families built their residences huddled together in compact settlements on land too steep and rocky for agriculture. In some instances these settlements had as many as one thousand or fifteen hundred people. To keep peace within these villages—and especially to deal with potential disputes over scarce natural resources—councils of descent group representatives enforced complex rules regarding agricultural and herding activities. Furthermore, because significant crop surpluses could be neither accumulated nor transported to market centers for sale, the amassing of land beyond subsistence needs was not a viable strategy. Thus there were few large landowners and few tenant clients in the highlands, and the competition for land did not politically isolate neighboring landowners from one another. In fact, the environment necessitated cooperation—for example, for the construction and maintenance of the irrigation system. Furthermore, since fields were scattered in different locations, landowners had to cooperate with different individuals in the various locations where they owned fields. Disputes occasionally arose between the owners of adjacent fields over the distribution of irrigation water, but because disputants had to cooperate to maintain the irrigation system itself, they were generally willing to allow their differences to be adjudicated without bloodshed.

It is clear that the ecological system of the highlands linked villagers in relationships of economic dependency. These relationships were further strengthened by the requirements of animal husbandry in the high mountains. Because of the difficult terrain, goats, who are particularly sure-footed in the mountains, comprised the majority of domesticated animals. However, grazing goats are difficult to control and are fully capable of destroying carefully cultivated fields. Therefore, village councils strongly enforced rules specifying the movement of goat herds. The animals were not allowed near cultivated fields



from early spring until late fall. This rule created serious problems for herd owners. First, in the spring the herds had to be driven long distances to high mountain pastures and in the fall had to be returned to pastures near the villages. Generally one individual alone could not accomplish this; therefore, herdsmen usually combined their labor. Second, the herds had to be watched carefully while in the high mountain pastures. To free a majority of the men from having to stay in the pastures away from their villages, most herdsmen formed cooperative companies whose members rotated herding responsibilities. This rotation allowed each member to spend a considerable portion of the spring-summer herding season in his village attending to his other affairs. Herding, like farming, created economic bonds between highland villagers that did not exist among the inhabitants of the lower valley.

Not only did ties of economic dependency link villagers in the highlands, but these ties also crosscut one another. Thus the members of one household cooperated with some households for herding activities and other households for the various agricultural activities. Such crosscutting relationships did not exist in lowland settlements. While disputes of one kind or another constantly occurred in both areas, highlanders had better economic reasons for peacefully resolving them because of the need to cooperate with so many others in economic ventures.\* It is not surprising, therefore, that settlements in the highlands took the form of compact villages, while lowland settlements were largely isolated forts and scattered homesteads.

Even more important for our argument here is that the need for peacefully settling disputes in the highlands affected the forms of traditional leadership. Although no institutionalized leadership positions existed in the highlands—the office of chief did not exist—various individuals did have reputations for leadership, and these reputations were at least partially based on the individual's ability to make peace and reconcile opponents in disputes.<sup>†</sup> In contrast, influential leaders

\*I do not wish to imply that all crosscutting ties in highland villages were based on the need for economic cooperation. In other writings (Keiser 1971, 1981) I have analyzed how the structure of kinship generated crosscutting ties in Oygul, a highland village in Darra-i Nur.

†Ovesen (1981: 230-33) gives a particularly interesting account of the *marat*, the traditional peacemaking institution in Darra-i Nur, which clearly shows the importance of arbitration skills to the political success of highland leaders. In

in the lowlands were those who defeated their enemies in disputes and thus furthered their own economic fortunes.

The economic importance of herding was another cause for differences in traditional political leadership between the two parts of the valley. Tribes were an important aspect of highland but not lowland social structure. Their importance in the highlands can be understood when the goat herding is analyzed in greater detail. Goat herding in Darra-i Nur created a potential for conflict, as well as a requirement for cooperation. Herding was a chancy operation at best. Natural disasters struck at random and often resulted in high animal casualties. Theft then became a viable means of recouping losses, and a potential for conflict was created. The scarcity of pasturage in the high mountains further exacerbated this potential. However, because of the many ties of cooperation which linked members of the same village, conflicts usually involved members of different villages. But individual villages were not pitted against all other villages. Rather they were joined together into tribes and village confederations (Ovesen 1981: 223-30), and it was these units which opposed one another over rival claims.

The political relevancy of tribes and confederations (as opposed to villages) in the highlands was linked to the nature of herding itself. It was difficult to successfully steal animals from herds pastured close to one's own. Herders knew each of their animals individually, and it would have been a simple matter for them to identify any stolen animals in nearby pastures—and then plan retaliatory raids. Constant raiding and counter-raiding between neighboring camps would have made it difficult to successfully carry out the necessary herding tasks. Therefore, members of neighboring pastures did not usually steal from one another; instead they cooperated in organizing and carrying out raids against distant rivals. In general, the ideological basis for this cooperation was membership in units of perceived common kinship. This common kinship provided the moral underpinnings for the trust on which such cooperation was predicated.

The importance of tribes and intertribal conflict had as much effect on political leadership in the highlands as did the necessity for

Nuristan the political importance of peacemaking for successful leadership is even greater than it is in Darra-i Nur. In Keiser (1971) I analyze some of the reasons for this.

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economic cooperation among village members. In the years preceding the incorporation of Darrai-Nur and neighboring areas into the Afghan state, instances of full-scale intertribal warfare often occurred. After the Afghan conquest of the area in the late nineteenth century such warfare was not tolerated by the central government, and the government was generally strong enough to suppress most of it. Thus in the decades between the conquest and the Communist coup intertribal antagonism most often took the form of small-scale animal raids and counter-raids. (Sometimes, when face-to-face encounters occurred, these resulted in fighting.) Successful raids depended upon knowledge, resourcefulness, and courage. It was necessary to travel stealthily over difficult mountain terrain, strike enemy camps quickly, and retreat rapidly. The personal qualities necessary for organizing and leading successful animal raids were highly valued, and many influential leaders first emerged as the organizers of such raids.

Intertribal conflicts also fostered leaders able to conduct complicated negotiations. Before the Saur Revolution, the highlands of all the valleys in the region formed an arena in which intertribal alliances and rivalries constantly shifted. In this arena tribal leaders often took part in complex negotiations with leaders of other tribes. Therefore, highland leaders had a great deal of experience in dealing with other tribal groups, and the most successful were highly skilled in melding a threat of force with a willingness to compromise so as to reach agreements acceptable to both parties to a dispute.

The different ecology in the lower valley did not require as much cooperation as in the highlands, and the reputation of lowland leaders was not usually contingent on successfully negotiating peaceful settlements. Rather their reputation depended upon accumulating land, money, and tenants by adeptly manipulating allies in a field of shifting political alliances, subtly threatening and using force against vulnerable neighbors, and skillfully utilizing bribery and personal connections to influence Afghan court decisions.

#### AFTERMATH OF THE SAUR REVOLUTION: RESPONSES TO CHANGE

Conditions in Darrai-Nur after the Saur Revolution created organizational problems that demanded new kinds of social arrangements and political skills. For the first time a motivation to overcome

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past political enmities, a need to form a viable military alliance, and a compulsion to rebel against the central government existed together. In response, a new pattern of political leadership was born—a pattern connected, however, to older values and previous forms of political organization.

Although a number of men in Darrai-Nur were potential leaders of the rebellion, those from the highlands of the valley had skills which placed them at a distinct advantage over those from the lowlands for at least three reasons. First, highland leaders knew how to organize and lead guerrilla warfare. During lifetimes of herding in the mountains, organizing successful animal raids had been an important qualification for leadership. A knowledge of the mountains, resourcefulness, and courage—all of which were required in animal raiding—were exactly the qualifications needed to organize successful guerrilla warfare against the government forces and their Soviet allies.

Second, highland leaders were skillful at negotiating village disputes. Because they possessed no physical or legal sanctions to enforce agreements, they learned to manipulate symbols that stood for general moral values. Thus they had the necessary skills for utilizing powerful Islamic symbols to effectively unite opposing groups and factions in the valley against the Communist government and its Soviet allies.

Finally, during the Muhammadzai period highland leaders had a great deal of experience in negotiating with leaders of other tribes and confederacies. The skill of combining threats of force with a willingness to compromise was useful in dealing with the potentially divisive groups and factions within the new Darrai-Nur alliance.

In contrast, politics in the lower valley had been confrontational rather than conciliatory, and lowland khans had not needed mediational skills. Thus they were not as well equipped to effectively mediate potentially divisive conflicts or to create and maintain a politically viable alliance. Further, the knowledge and ability to successfully operate in the Afghan legal system so important for khans in the Muhammadzai period were useless following the Saur Revolution since the courts were now part of the very system the inhabitants of the valley were rebelling against. Finally, and perhaps most important, khans had never developed the skills to successfully organize and lead guerrilla warfare in the mountains.



## BEYOND THE REBELLION: FURTHER QUESTIONS

In addition to the questions discussed above, three equally, if not more important questions stand out: (1) What can an understanding of the rebellion in Darra-i Nur tell us about rebellions in other areas of Afghanistan? (2) What relevancy does such an understanding have for theoretical issues in political anthropology? and (3) What are the implications of the rebellion in Darra-i Nur for the current theoretical debate among social scientists concerning the nature and causes of peasant insurrections in agrarian societies? Answering such questions in detail would take us beyond the limits of this essay, but I feel that the analysis developed here makes a start. I have argued for the importance of understanding how symbols motivate people to act in terms of moral imperatives. The relationship between the operation of symbols in ritual contexts and the need to achieve a sense of self (as argued by Cohen) is particularly important. Such a perspective could be extremely useful in understanding popular uprisings not only in Darra-i Nur, but in other areas of Afghanistan as well. For example, as Strand reports in his essay on the insurrection in Nuristan above, the refusal of local government officials to allow personnel under their authority to participate in the traditional ritual of nightly prayers was a crucial factor in instigating rebellion. It seems clear that a symbolic interactionist analysis could be fruitfully applied here.

In regard to the more general theoretical questions, for some time political anthropology has been dominated by an approach based on the assumption that political behavior is primarily motivated by considerations of individual self-interest. This approach, argued persuasively by Fredrik Barth (1966), among others, has provided an explanation for phenomena not satisfactorily dealt with by earlier anthropologists. Yet more recently political anthropologists have begun to question the power of this theoretical approach to explain many aspects of political behavior. Our analysis of the Darra-i Nur rebellion is relevant because it argues for the importance of symbols and moral imperatives in understanding political phenomena. A more general study of the Afghan rebellion could help in understanding the particular manner in which self-interest and moral imperatives are intertwined in political situations.

Finally, in the current debate on peasant insurrections, various Marxist and neo-Marxist (or perhaps more accurately semi-Marxist)

approaches have been developed. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Moore 1966), *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (Wolf 1969), and *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol 1979) all utilize Marxist notions of class conflict, political domination, and control over the means of production to explain why peasant insurrections occur. At least on the surface such approaches do not satisfactorily explain the rebellion in either Darra-i Nur or other areas of Afghanistan. As we have seen, before the April coup the inhabitants of Darra-i Nur viewed the central government as an instrument of Muhammadzai domination. While they suffered for years under this domination, they chose to rebel against a Communist regime that publicly denounced the Muhammadzai, jailed and executed members of the old elite, and embarked on an ambitious land reform policy which broke up estates and distributed the land to previous tenants. It is obvious that focusing an analysis of the Afghan rebellion on this current debate would not only be theoretically enlightening, but might result in a deeper understanding of other peasant rebellions as well.